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ABSTRACT

Noting that an "at risk" population in American higher education is often overlooked, this paper investigates the ABD (all but dissertation) phenomenon, analyzing efficiency, educational excellence, and equity issues. The paper discusses barriers to completion of the dissertation, as well as inequities found in the education of female doctoral students as compared to male doctoral students. The paper's findings reveal that ABD status raises significant efficiency issues for institutions of higher education and poses potential problems for the communications discipline since the number of undergraduates is outstripping the number of students earning advanced degrees. The paper concludes with 10 recommendations to both individual students and to institutions for preventing a lengthy ABD status for Ph.D. candidates. (Contains 25 references.) (RS)

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The ABD Phenomenon

The "At Risk" Population in Higher Education

and the Discipline of Communication

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Abstract

The term "at risk" is usually associated with secondary school drop-outs in the American educational system. However, there is another "at risk" population in American Higher Education that is often overlooked--those Ph.D. candidates who remain ABD (all but dissertation). This paper investigates this phenomenon, analyzing efficiency, educational excellence, and equity issues. The findings reveal that ABD status raises significant efficiency issues for higher education institutions and poses potential problems for the communications discipline since the number of undergraduates is fast outstripping the number of students earning advanced degrees. Barriers to completion of the dissertation are discussed, as well as the inequities found in the education of female doctoral students as compared to male doctoral students. Ten recommendations are offered to both individual students and to institutions for preventing a lengthy ABD status for Ph.D. candidates.

The ABD Phenomenon

The "At Risk" Population in Higher Education

When the term "at risk" is mentioned in education, generally we think of the secondary school drop-out problem. However, another "at risk" population is found in American Higher Education--the doctoral student who is classified as ABD (all but dissertation) (Germeroth, 1991, p. 60). In 1986-87, 34,120 doctoral degrees were granted by United States institutions (Snyder, 1989, Table 204). Unfortunately, as discussed by several researchers (Cheatham, Edwards, & Erickson, 1982; Sternberg, 1981; Moore, 1985), from twenty-five to forty percent of all doctoral candidates fail to complete their degrees. What about this well-educated "at risk" population? How does this problem impact the discipline of communication? This paper discusses the ABD phenomenon, emphasizing the issues of efficiency, educational excellence, and equity in higher education.

Significance of the Problem and Efficiency Issues

To establish the significance of the ABD dilemma, consider the following estimate made by Germeroth (1991):

> . . . 60% of the 51,000 ABD's generated every year in the social sciences, education, and humanities remain ABD . . . . Translated into

> numbers of significant proportion, there were approximately a half-million persons who became ABD between 1980 and 1989. Of these, one-quarter of a million will remain ABD (p. 60).

Goulden (1991) states: "The loss of students during the dissertation phase is a significant problem" (p. 39). She further argues: "Failure to successfully finish or extensively delay in finishing graduate research may be a personal tragedy for individual students, but it is also a wasteful, negative situation for departments and institutions" (p. 40). In Pursuit of the Ph.D., Bowen and Rudenstine (1992), basing their findings on thirty years worth of statistical records, report that fewer than half of all entering students in the Ph.D. programs examined had earned their doctorates (A33). In the discipline of communication, Chesebro (1991) observes that the number of Ph.D. degrees granted in communication has not kept pace with the increasing rate of bachelor degrees conferred in communication. Chesebro emphasizes that the "pool of new instructors with advanced degrees is declining compared to the ever increasing body of undergraduate students in communication" (p. 2).

In 1965, Wilson bemoaned the length of time students were taking to complete the doctorate. He writes of the interval between completion of the baccalaureate degree and the completion of the doctorate, concluding that the

time period varied from a low of seven years in the discipline of chemistry to a high of 15 years in education (p. 2). In the intervening years since Wilson's study, the length of time between the B.A. and the Ph.D. has actually increased. In a statistical profile of persons receiving a doctorate in 1986-87, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that the median time from bachelor's to the doctorate degree was 10.4 years. The shortest time lapse from receiving the B.A. to completion of the Ph.D. was reported by students in the physical sciences (7.1 years), while the longest time lapse was in the field of education (16.2 years). The lengthening time period between completion of undergraduate work and the bestowal of the terminal degree is an efficiency issue which institutions of higher education need to address. The significant number of doctoral students who fail to complete their degrees will only intensify the anticipated shortage of college professors in the 1990's.

The Issue of Excellence and Barriers to Dissertation Completion

The "dissertation experience" has been ingrained in American higher education as the crowning achievement of those who desire a Ph.D. since the first Ph.D. was granted by Yale in 1861. Moore (1985) describes this final hurdle:

Of all the sacred cows of academia, the Ph.D. dissertation is the most

> holy. The idea that to attain academia's crown jewel you must make an original contribution to knowledge in your field is an unquestionable item of faith. That the dissertation process should be a long, ego-threatening, gut wrenching experience goes without saying. That a dissertation is not acceptable until a committee of professors who could not agree on the time of day, all agree to accept your complex work is academia's most unshakable rubric (p. 127).

Excellence, then, so far as Ph.D. attainment is concerned, means completion of a dissertation. But as pointed out by Moore, dissertation completion is fraught with obstacles.

The barriers alluded to by Moore have been the subject of several studies. According to Madsen (1983), seven circumstances serve to "impede progress toward completion of the degree": 1) Leaving the university, 2) Lack of focus in choosing a research topic, 3) Perfectionism, 4) Too casual ideas about research, 5) Compulsiveness which "cloaks" synthesis, 6) Procrastination, and 7) Inability to deal with independent learning situations (pp. 1-5). Germeroth (1991) determined that the greatest barriers for candidates who remained ABD for five or more years included 1) Job related pressures, 2) Candidate's own perfectionism, 3) Financial problems, 4)

Choosing a topic, 5) Interpretation of data, 6) Accessibility of director, 7) Role conflict, and 8) Developing methodology (p.83). Wilson (1965) identified five factors that impeded progress in obtaining the Ph.D: 1) Discontinuity of attendance, 2) Off-campus dissertation, 3) Financial problems, 4) Family obligations, and 5) Health problems (p. 56). Although these studies cover different time periods, many of the same obstacles occur on each researcher's list of barriers.

The Male/Female Difference--A Question of Equity

These barriers pose significant problems for both male and female doctoral candidates. However, the female doctoral candidate is even more "at risk" so far as degree completion is concerned. Patricia Cross (1974) reports that "discrimination against women, in contrast to that against minorities, is still overt and socially acceptable within the academic community" (p. 29). Furthermore, the attrition rate of women doctoral students is higher than that of their male counterparts. Feldman (1974) found that gender was a strong predictor for degree completion in studies conducted at UC-Berkeley and among Woodrow Wilson Fellows, concluding that "women admitted to Ph.D. programs were much less likely than their male counterparts eventually to obtain the Ph.D. (p. 9). The attrition rate of female graduate students was a

concern expressed by a committee report to the Executive Board of the Graduate School at the University of Michigan in 1974:

> Attrition of women in greater proportion than men at each rung of the academic ladder is a symptom of discriminatory policies and behavior within academe. The causes of this attrition include overt discriminatory acts, an absence of faculty role models, limited flexibility in administrative policies, a lack of support facilities for non-traditional students, and social pressures outside the university (p. vi).

Has the attrition rate of women doctoral candidates identified in the 1970's continued into the 90's? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a total of 34,120 doctoral degrees were awarded in 1986-87. Of that total, 22,099 (or 65 percent) were men and 12,021 (or 35 percent) were women (Snyder, 1989, Table 204). However, the total enrollment of all graduate students for the same time span showed more women enrolled (758,624) than men (673,314) (Snyder, 1989, Table 151). In the discipline of communication, 275 Ph.D. degrees were conferred during 1986-87 with 158 (57%) being awarded to men and 117 (42%) awarded to women. For the same time period, there were 45,408 bachelor's degrees conferred in communication and 3,937 Master's degrees given with women earning 27,253

(60%) of the Bachelors's degrees and 2,331 (59%) of the Master's degrees (Snyder, 1989, Table 224). These statistics reveal that women communication students are in the majority for both bachelor and master's degrees, but that this trend does not extend to the Ph.D. level. Because of the lack of statistical data reporting attrition rates for graduate students, specifically doctoral students, it is not possible to conclude that women are dropping out at a higher rate than men. It is noteworthy that even though the number of women enrolled in graduate programs is larger than the number of men, the number of degrees granted continues to be higher for males than for females.

Stryker, Twohey, and Halderson (1985), in a paper presented at the Annual Woman Researcher Conference, addressed the unique problems encountered by women in doctoral programs. Their report centered on the role conflict experienced by women. In introducing their viewpoint, the researchers declared:

> Do we think our doctoral experiences are different from those of men? Most of us do . . . . One of the most frequently mentioned differences was that men have wives and that their family responsibilities are different (p. 20).

Stryker et al. (1985) consider barriers to women to be both "internal" and

"institutional" (p. 25). One of the internal barriers they discuss is "role overload" which occurs more frequently to the returning female doctoral candidate in education, who not only is a student, but is also a community member, family member, and worker (p. 26). Hite (1983), in her study of role congruence and faculty support for doctoral students, reports: "Women pursuing doctoral study in any field experience conflict in integrating the student role into their lifestyles, that males at the same educational level do not face" (p. 62).

Another barrier that seems to impact women is the negative perception they have of themselves as scholars. Adler (1976) indicates that "women seem to share with men the belief that females are less competent and perhaps less able to undertake or succeed at professional work than are males " (p. 201). Bolig (1982) relates the comments of female Ph.D. candidates who illustrate the negative perception identified by Adler:

> At times I felt as if someday "they" would find out that I was not really intellectually capable.
>
> At the beginning, I especially questioned my academic ability (p. 21).

Family responsibilities also assume the role of obstacles for women Ph.D. candidates. Moore (1985) notes that parenthood has a negative effect

on both men's and women's chances of finishing their degrees, but concludes that "the effect is more severe for women" (p. 89). Moore explains that women with families are seen by faculty and fellow students as "less committed to career," while married men are seen as "mature" and "stable" (p. 89).

Obviously, the question of educational equity must be considered as the barriers to dissertation completion are analyzed. Do men and women have equal opportunities to succeed in Ph.D. programs? The foregoing discussion suggests they do not. While both men and women encounter barriers, it appears that females have many more hurdles to leap than do males. Hite (1983), in a study of doctoral students at Purdue University, found that regardless of field of study, males reported more "role congruence" and "more support" from their faculty members than did females (p. viii). Lacking faculty support, or the perception that there is little support, when coupled with the role conflict female doctoral students experience, erects yet another barrier for women that is not faced by men. This suggests that educational opportunity may not be equal for men and women in doctoral programs.

Recommendations

If the ABD phenomenon is to be eliminated, institutions of higher

education and individuals who find themselves labeled "ABD" for lengthy time periods, need to form a partnership. I offer the following recommendations for dealing with this highly educated "at risk" population:

1. As students enter doctoral programs, they should be oriented to the research expectations required for the dissertation. Students should become familiar with the following dissertation guidebooks long before they choose a topic for research: Sternberg's (1981) How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation, Davis and Parker's (1979) Writing the Doctoral Dissertation, Madsen's (1983) Successful Dissertations and Theses, and Moore's (1985) Winning the Ph.D. Game.

2. Students should develop computer skills, as suggested by Germeroth (1991), well in advance of the beginning of semester classes. Institutional support in this area would be most beneficial. Providing access to computers for students to use would lessen the financial burden of students having to purchase their own computer systems.

3. To deal with the problems of procrastination and lethargy, once the writing phase of a dissertation has begun, Germeroth (1991) recommends keeping a dissertation progress log. Moore (1985) reports an interesting strategy. One woman set her wedding date, deciding if

she didn't finish her dissertation by that date, she would give up on the wedding or the dissertation. According to Moore's account, the student accomplished more in the three months preceding the wedding than she had in the two previous years (p. 142).

4. Faculty support for doctoral students, particularly women, must be evident through-out the course of the degree program. A system of advising that matches professors with Ph.D. candidates upon entry should be instituted, much as is commonly practiced at the undergraduate level.

5. Peer support groups, as described by Stalker (1991), should be formed while students are still in residence at the university and continued when the ABD's have accepted employment elsewhere. Stalker claims "there is only one group more isolated than people who are writing their dissertation; that is people who should be writing their dissertations but are not" (p. 56). A peer support group can make this "lonely" enterprise more bearable. A variation of this suggestion is the "dissertation partner" discussed by Monsour and Corman (1991). In this approach, "two individuals who are at the same point in their graduate career agree to team-up and provide one another support

through the dissertation process" (p. 182).

6. For those ABD's accepting employment prior to completion of the dissertation, efforts should be made to complete the dissertation proposal process as suggested by Wright (1991) prior to leaving the degree-granting university. This same strategy should be adopted by the returning education doctoral student who must juggle full-time employment with coursework and with writing a dissertation.

7. However, based on the findings reported by Germeroth (1991), most ABD's offer the same single bit of advice: "Do not leave the degree granting institution without the degree in hand" (p. 68). Graduate faculty support could be instrumental in guiding students to avoid full-time employment before fully investigating the demands of full-time work and dissertation writing.

8. Doctoral students should give careful consideration to choosing the dissertation chairman and committee members. If possible, students should have a faculty mentor whose research interest parallels their own. To insure harmony (if indeed, that is possible!) discuss the potential committee members with the chairman prior to asking committee members to serve. If the chairman vetoes one of your

nominees, as suggested by Moore (1985), it's best to choose another committee member. Women students should be encouraged to seek out female faculty to serve as committee members. Having a female role model will assist women students in dealing with the role conflict they normally encounter.

9. In some of the programs surveyed, students are encouraged to identify their research interests as early as possible in the completion of their coursework. By doing so, the six to nine credit hours of research required for degree completion can be devoted to writing the dissertation proposal and completing preliminary research. Therefore, when all coursework is completed, these students will have already finished a substantial part of the dissertation writing process. Such guided research opportunities can significantly decrease the B.A.-Ph.D. time lapse. Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) suggest that having students begin dissertation work in their first or second year of study would result in more efficient graduate programs (A34).

10. Institutions should aggressively pursue more funding of dissertation research for their doctoral students. Institutions who employ ABD's should also adopt this policy. In some cases, doctoral students

requesting research funds have been denied them by the institution at which they are currently employed as full-time instructors, not because of lack of funds, but because research funds "are not available for those doing dissertation work" (Letter from Graduate School, November, 1991).

Implications for Further Research

This paper is written using the assumption that the earning of a Ph.D. should be the goal of the "at risk" ABD population. However, an alternative not discussed is other certification and degree programs. If a student's goal is to become a better college teacher, then a talent development argument would be that this student needs to focus on teaching rather than some lengthy research project. In such cases, students would receive ABD status upon completion of a given number of hours of coursework. Other alternatives would be to consider the C.A.G.S. (certificate of advanced graduate study) or the C. Phil (candidate in philosophy.) Further inquiry needs to be made to see if alternative degree distinctions would serve the doctoral student's best interests. The Doctor of Arts, a non-research oriented degree that focuses on pedagogical methods, is another alternative that should be investigated. For those of us in the communication discipline, faced with an ever increasing

number of undergraduate majors and with new core curriculum requirements in our discipline which also increase class loads, this is an issue that must be addressed. Chesebro (1991) suggests that the trends of rapid growth in undergraduate communication majors and slower growth in Masters and Ph.D. degree programs provide a rationale for increasing the number of masters and Ph.D. programs in the discipline of communication. However, as suggested by Bowen and Rudenstine (1992), perhaps the best answer lies in using existing programs more efficiently. As Boyer (1990) so eloquently states we are faced with "the need to clarify campus missions and relate the work of the academy more directly to the realities of contemporary life" (p. 13). In the discipline of communication, we must examine instructional needs and determine how best to meet them, as well as reclaim those who have languished in the abyss of ABD status. Obviously, better data collection that would reveal attrition rates for Ph.D. students in communication should be pursued.

Conclusion

If we are to rescue the ABD "at risk" population in American higher education, we must deal with the issues of efficiency, excellence, and equity. Steps must be taken by both individual students and by doctoral degree

granting institutions to facilitate movement through the educational pipeline. As professionals in the discipline of communication, we must make more efficient use of existing Ph.D. programs. The attrition rate of women gradate students must be addressed and strategies adopted to deal with this problem. Peer support groups should be encouraged and organized by institutions. Increased faculty support for both men and women doctoral students could lead to higher completion rates. This, in turn, would assist both individuals and institutions in achieving educational excellence, a worthy goal of what we have deemed the "communication century."

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